16. The electronic commerce system of claim 15 wherein the server computer is programmed to authenticate authority of the client computer by virtue of a two-way-authenticated SSL connection.

17. The electronic commerce system of claim 15 wherein the server computer is programmed to authenticate authority of the client computer using a basic authentication method.

18. The electronic commerce system of claim 15 wherein the server computer is programmed to authenticate authority of the client computer using a client certificate.

SUB03 19. The electronic commerce system of claim 11 wherein the digital coupon contains a serial number to ensure that the digital coupon is used only once and the server computer is programmed to determine whether the digital coupon has been used previously and to accept the digital coupon only if it has not been used previously.

20. The electronic commerce system of claim 11 wherein the server computer is programmed to set at least one term of the order acceptance response based on whether the digital coupon is present in the order acceptance request.

21. The electronic commerce system of claim 20 wherein the at least one term of the order acceptance response is a price.

SUB04 22. The electronic commerce system of claim 11 wherein the server computer is programmed to set at least one term of the order acceptance response based on whether the digital coupon in the order acceptance request is a particular type of digital coupon.

23. The electronic commerce system of claim 11 wherein the digital coupon is a gift certificate.

24. The electronic commerce system of claim 23 wherein the gift certificate comprises a serial number.

25. The electronic commerce system of claim 24 wherein the server computer is programmed to ensure that the serial number has been used only once by checking a database in which the serial number is stored.

26. The electronic commerce system of claim 23 wherein the client computer is programmed to display an icon of the gift certificate and to initiate the order acceptance request after a recipient of the gift certificate clicks on the icon.

27. The electronic commerce system of claim 26 further comprising a merchant computer, the merchant computer being programmed to respond to the recipient clicking on the icon by transmitting an order form to the client computer, the client computer being programmed to initiate the order acceptance request when the recipient fills in the order form.

28. The electronic commerce system of claim 23 wherein the client computer is a first client computer programmed to receive the gift certificate from a second client computer.

29. The electronic commerce system of claim 28 wherein the server computer is programmed to transmit the gift certificate to the second client computer, which in turn is programmed to forward the gift certificate to the first client computer.

30. The electronic commerce system of claim 29 wherein the gift certificate comprises a serial number and the server computer is programmed to create the serial number of the gift certificate before transmitting the gift certificate to the second client computer.

31. The electronic commerce system of claim 30 wherein the server computer is programmed to store the serial number in a database before transmitting the gift certificate to the second client computer, and is programmed, when it receives the gift certificate from the first

client computer to ensure that the serial number has been used only once by checking the database in which the serial number is stored.

32. The electronic commerce system of claim 29 further comprising a merchant computer programmed to transmit the gift certificate to the server computer before the server computer transmits the gift certificate to the second client computer.

33. The electronic commerce system of claim 32 wherein the merchant computer is programmed to transmit the gift certificate to the server computer in the form of an order acceptance request that includes extension information indicating that the order acceptance request is a gift certificate.

34. The electronic commerce system of claim 3 wherein the cryptographic security codes are embedded within respective ones of the plurality of modular elements.

35. The electronic commerce system of claim 3 wherein the cryptographic security codes are digital signatures.

36. The electronic commerce system of claim 3 wherein the cryptographic security codes are message authentication codes.

37. A method of processing order acceptance requests in an electronic commerce system, comprising a client computer and a server computer interconnected by a public packet switched communications network, the method comprising;

receiving at the server computer an order acceptance request transmitted by the client computer comprising a plurality of terms or conditions of a proposed offer for a purchase, the order acceptance request comprising a plurality of modular elements individually protected by cryptographic security codes;

processing the order acceptance request based on pre-programmed criteria, including authentication of the cryptographic security codes and examination of the modular elements individually protected by the cryptographic security codes; and

based on the processing of the order acceptance request, transmitting to the client computer an order acceptance response based on the pre-programmed criteria.

38. The method of claim 37 wherein at least one of the modular elements is a digital coupon.

39. The method of claim 38 wherein the client computer receives the digital coupon, protected by a cryptographic security code, from another computer.

40. The method of claim 38 wherein the digital coupon is configured to be used by any coupon holder that possesses the digital coupon, the method further comprising accepting the digital coupon at the server computer is programmed without regard to identity of the coupon holder.

41. The method of claim 38 further comprising the steps of determining whether a coupon holder is authorized to use the digital coupon and accepting the digital coupon at the server computer only if the coupon holder is authorized to use the digital coupon.

42. The method of claim 41 further comprising receiving information at the server computer provided by the client computer concerning identify of the coupon holder.

43. The method of claim 42 further comprising authenticating authority of the client computer, at the server computer, by virtue of a two-way-authenticated SSL connection.

44. The method of claim 42 wherein authenticating authority of the client computer is performed using a basic authentication method.

45. The method of claim 42 wherein authenticating authority of the client computer is performed using a client certificate.

46. The method of claim 38 wherein the digital coupon contains a serial number to ensure that the digital coupon is used only once, the method further comprising determining at the server computer whether the digital coupon has been used previously and accepting the digital coupon only if it has not been used previously.

47. The method of claim 38 further comprising setting, at the server computer, at least one term of the order acceptance response based on whether the digital coupon is present in the order acceptance request.

48. The method of claim 47 wherein the at least one term of the order acceptance response is a price.

49. The method of claim 38 further comprising setting, at the server computer, at least one term of the order acceptance response based on whether the digital coupon in the order acceptance request is a particular type of digital coupon.

50. The method of claim 38 wherein the digital coupon is a gift certificate.

51. The method of claim 50 wherein the gift certificate comprises a serial number.

52. The method of claim 51 further comprising ensuring that the serial number has been used only once by checking a database at the server computer in which the serial number is stored.

53. The method of claim 50 wherein the client computer displays an icon of the gift certificate and initiates the order acceptance request after a recipient of the gift certificate clicks on the icon.

54. The method of claim 53 wherein the electronic commerce system further comprises a merchant computer and wherein the merchant computer responds to the recipient clicking on the icon by transmitting an order form to the client computer, and wherein the client computer initiates the order acceptance request when the recipient fills in the order form.

55. The method of claim 50 wherein the client computer is a first client computer that receive the gift certificate from a second client computer in the electronic commerce system.

56. The method of claim 55 further comprising transmitting the gift certificate from the server computer to the second client computer, which in turn forwards the gift certificate to the first client computer.

57. The method of claim 56 wherein the gift certificate comprises a serial number and wherein the method further comprises creating the serial number of the gift certificate at the server computer before transmitting the gift certificate to the second client computer.

58. The method of claim 56 further comprising storing the serial number in a database at the server computer before transmitting the gift certificate to the second client computer, and when the server computer receives the gift certificate from the first client computer, ensuring that the serial number has been used only once by checking the database at the server computer in which the serial number is stored.

59. The method of claim 56 further wherein the electronic commerce system further comprises a merchant computer, the method further comprising receiving the gift certificate at the server computer from the merchant computer before transmitting the gift certificate from the server computer to the second client computer.